

**Middle East  
Series**

**CARNEGIE**  
P A P E R S

**WOMEN'S RIGHTS  
AND DEMOCRACY  
IN THE ARAB  
WORLD**

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CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT  
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## **About the Author**

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THE U.S. GOVERNMENT HAS MADE THE PROMOTION OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS and the empowerment of women a central element of its new campaign to modernize and democratize the Arab world. The Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the major program through which the United States seeks to facilitate the transformation of the Arab world, makes women's rights one of its priorities. No official U.S. speech about reform in the Middle East fails to mention the cause of women's rights. And the issue of women is sure to be raised at meetings where Middle East affairs are discussed, regardless of the main purpose of the gathering.

The new U.S. focus on women's rights and the position of women in the Arab world in general received strong encouragement by the publication of the United Nations Development Program's *Arab Human Development Report 2002*. Signed by a number of prominent Arab intellectuals, the report drew a dismal picture of a region lagging behind the rest of the world because of major deficits in freedom, women's empowerment, and education. The report argued that the deficit in women's empowerment was not simply a problem of justice and equity, but a major cause of the Arab world's backwardness. "The utilization of Arab women's capabilities through political and economic participation remains the lowest in the world in quantitative terms, as evidenced by the very low share of women in parliaments, cabinets, and the work force, and in the trend toward the feminization of unemployment," the report explained. "Society as a whole suffers when a huge proportion of its productive potential is stifled..."<sup>1</sup> The argument has since been repeated by President George W. Bush and administration officials. "No society can succeed and prosper while denying basic rights to the women of their country," declared President Bush in a May 2003 commencement speech at the University of South Carolina. Secretary of State Colin Powell echoed the sentiment, arguing: "Until the countries of the Middle East unleash the abilities and potential of their women, they will not build a future of hope."<sup>2</sup>

Promotion of women's rights in the Middle East is an easy goal for the United States to announce. It lends itself to resounding rhetorical statements. It can be translated in practice into many concrete, small, projects that are not seen as threatening by most Arab regimes and are even welcomed by them as a means to demonstrate their willingness to democratize and modernize. An improvement in the rights of women does not threaten the power of the incumbent authoritarian government in the same way as free elections or a free press would. Except in Saudi Arabia, Arab leaders and opposition political parties alike, including all but the most fundamentalist Islamic organizations, gladly embrace the rhetoric of women's rights. Many governments are even willing to take small concrete steps, such as appointing the occasional woman to a high, visible position, or introducing amendments to divorce or family laws. For the United States and other democracy-promoting countries, women's programs have the added advantage of being relatively cheap and easy to implement—for example, encouraging schooling for girls, financing women's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or providing training for women's candidates in countries where women can run for office.

The popularity of the women's rights cause and its obvious intrinsic merit have unfortunately generated many facile assumptions and much confusion about the conditions of women in the Middle East and the problems they face; about the relationship between women's rights and democracy; and about what an outside intervenor like the United States can accomplish. This paper seeks to clarify some of these issues. It fully accepts the dominant assumptions that the rights of Arab women are not sufficiently protected in the Arab world; that social norms preclude women from fully enjoying even their limited legal rights; that this holds back the entire society; and that the United States should be concerned about the problem and contribute to its solution. It cautions, however, against the assumption that by promoting women's rights the United States contributes to the democratization of the Arab world, and it calls for a clearer separation of programs promoting the rights of women and opportunities for them and those promoting democracy.

### WOMEN IN THE ARAB WORLD

There are many misperceptions in the United States about the problems faced by women in Arab countries. The dominant image prevailing in this country is that of veiled, homebound, uneducated women who need help to take the first steps toward emancipation. Those women undoubtedly exist in the Arab world. So do highly educated, professional women, quite emancipated in their own minds but still struggling against restrictive social values. Nowhere in the Arab world do women enjoy equal rights, let alone equal opportunities, with men. The situation, however, varies considerably from country to country. This is true whether one talks of political rights, civil rights, family law, access to education and jobs, or more generally, the restrictions imposed on women by social customs. Social class creates additional differences among women in some countries. These differences are not sufficiently acknowledged outside the Arab world. Even the *Arab Human Development Reports* tend to generalize about Arab women, despite the fact that the statistical tables they contain contradict such generalizations.

Of the sixteen countries located in the Middle East and North Africa, ten have signed, and nine have ratified, the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination against Women.<sup>3</sup> Even in those countries, however, women's political, educational, and especially personal rights vary greatly.

#### Political Rights

Arab countries severely curtail the political rights of all their citizens, men and women. Even when recognized on paper, they are rarely respected in practice. Here, I am only discussing the formal political rights of women. Only three Arab countries do not recognize the right of women to vote and to stand for elections. Two of the three states, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), do not hold elections in the first place, leaving Kuwait as the only country that holds regular elections but excludes women.

Some Middle East states recognized the political rights of women relatively early—Syria in 1949, Lebanon in 1952, Egypt in 1956, and Tunisia in 1957. It is worth adding here that Turkey, a Muslim country in the Mediterranean basin, although of course not an Arab state, recognized women's right to vote in 1930 and their right to stand for elections in 1934, ahead of many European countries. Except for the Gulf countries, Arab nations recognized the political rights of women around the same time as most other developing countries.<sup>4</sup>

No comprehensive data are available about the extent to which women exercise the right to vote—and even less about whether they vote autonomously rather than following the directions of a man in the family. What is clear, however, is that few women stand for office even when they are allowed to do so by law and that few are appointed to ministerial positions. The presence of women in parliaments and ministerial positions ranges from none in most countries to a maximum of about 12 percent in a few cases. Governing remains an overwhelmingly male prerogative in Arab countries—but it is worth bearing in mind that this is true in most of the world. In the United States women occupy only 14 percent of the seats in the House of Representatives and 13 percent in the Senate. Women approach parity with men in political posts only in some Scandinavian countries.

### **Educational Rights**

Access to education varies widely among Arab countries for both boys and girls. For example, among primary school age children, 98 percent attend school in Tunisia, but only 57 percent in Saudi Arabia. In most countries, more boys attend primary school than girls, but the difference is quite low in some countries—two percentage points in Tunisia and three in Algeria—but dramatic in others—44 percent of girls and 76 percent of boys are in primary school in Yemen, for example. In Bahrain, the UAE, and Qatar, more girls than boys attend primary school.

When it comes to secondary education, the enrollment rate for women is higher than for men in Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, Tunisia, and the UAE. In tertiary education, more women than men attend school in six countries.<sup>5</sup> In some cases, the difference is considerable: In Kuwait 13 percent of men and 30 percent of women are enrolled in tertiary education. Except in a few countries, thus, Arab women are no more education-deprived than Arab men.

Enrollment statistics do not tell the entire story, and more detailed data are difficult to acquire. For example, it is not clear whether the quality of girls' and boys' school is comparable in all countries and at all grade levels. What is clear is that education does not open up the same employment opportunities for women as for men.

### **Personal Status and Family Law**

In this area, women remain at a clear disadvantage throughout the Arab world. In most countries, it is practically impossible for women but quite easy for men to file for divorce. Polygamy is legal and socially accepted, although not widely practiced. Laws, and even more clearly social values, condone so-called honor killings. With few exceptions, such as Jordan where the legal age for marriage was recently raised from 15 to 18, women can be married off by their parents at a very young age and without their consent. Progress in these areas is extremely slow, and there is much social resistance to the legal reforms introduced in some countries. A 2001 Egyptian law granting women the right to file for divorce led to many dire predictions of social disintegration, including in the more liberal press. In Morocco, King Mohammed VI's proposal to give women greater equality, including the right to divorce, sparked large demonstrations by Islamist groups. Pro-reform demonstrations also took place, but the opponents of equality far outnumbered the supporters.

Reforms of family status laws are likely to emerge as the major battleground for women in the Middle East. Such reforms are crucial to improving the conditions of women. New laws do not change social attitudes instantaneously; indeed, in some cases they make the conservative elements more

combative, but in the long run they help create more opportunities for women. However, these reforms are politically and culturally sensitive, and involvement or, in the eyes of some, interference by the United States could create a serious backlash. Already, the more conservative Islamist organizations condemn U.S. efforts to promote greater social and political participation by women, claiming that it would eventually lead to social promiscuity and license as happened in the United States.

The difficulty of working on issues that directly affect the social position of women and their status within the family is enhanced by the differences between educated, emancipated urban women and uneducated ones, both rural and urban, which exist in most countries. It is easy for foreigners to communicate with the former, but by doing so they only reach a small and atypical segment of the population, which is not always in touch with the rest, nor necessarily sensitive to their problems and values.

In view of the above considerations, it is clear that overgeneralizations about the conditions of women in the Arab world, their rights, and their empowerment are dangerous. Such generalizations risk making U.S. assistance ineffective. The curtailing of political rights in the Arab world is not primarily a women's issue and should not be treated as if it were. Putting in place programs to get more women elected to powerless parliaments neither empowers women nor promotes democracy. Access to education remains a serious problem for women in some countries, but in others women are already better educated than men, and the real problem for them is the absence of opportunities to use their education and knowledge once they graduate. Educated urban women in North Africa or Egypt encounter problems that are quite similar to those women confronted everywhere until recently—the slow breakdown of the barrier separating women's and men's roles, traditions that curtail the freedom of women under the guise of protecting them, and men's resistance to the professional advancement of women. They know a lot better than outsiders what are the real problems they face and what they can do about them. Rural women in Yemen, deprived of access to education and any public role, face completely different problems and probably need more outside support. Thus, it is not sufficient to talk about promoting the position of women in the Arab world, or increasing educational opportunities for them. Different countries, and different groups of women, need different reforms, including some in which U.S. agencies should not meddle.

## WOMEN'S RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY

Support for women's rights in the Arab world is seen in the United States as part of the effort to promote democracy in the region. Yet, the relationship between women's rights and democracy is not simple. The idea that working for women's rights is an integral part of the struggle for democracy is in part a tautology and in part simply wrong. The statement is tautological in the sense that democracy entails equality for all citizens, thus promoting women's rights means promoting democracy. But democracy also entails creating institutions that are accountable to the citizens and curb one another's power through a system of checks and balances. The existence of such institutions does not depend on the rights of women. These institutions can thrive, and have thrived historically, even when women do not enjoy the same political and civil rights as men. Conversely, states that did not have accountable institutions or a system of checks and balances have recognized the equality of women, historically and even now. Socialist countries in particular emphasized that they promoted the equality of women better than Western countries, while in practice curtailing the political and civil rights of all citizens.

In countries that started developing democratic systems before World War II, democratic political institutions were established over a hundred years before the political rights of women were recognized or even before women's rights emerged as an issue. The United States and Great Britain started developing strong democratic institutions without the benefit of women's suffrage or even of universal male suffrage. Political participation in both countries was originally quite limited. Over the course of the nineteenth century participation expanded to include the male population—at least the white male population in the United States. Resistance to women's participation continued unabated until 1918 in Great Britain and 1920 in the United States.

The battle for women's suffrage was quite difficult in both countries. Although in retrospect the outcome seems inevitable, it did not appear so at the time. Social values and customs prevented the recognition of equal rights for women, in the same way as they once prevented the recognition of equal rights of racial minorities in the United States. Once women became mobilized, however, the democratic nature of the political system made the outcome inevitable because only a degree of repression untenable in a democratic system could have stopped women from demanding equal rights. Despite widespread social prejudice against women's rights, democratic principles left no other choice. The inclusion of women was part and parcel of democratic consolidation, as was the inclusion of racial minorities in the United States forty years later. The existence of democratic institutions and of a democratic culture and tradition made the inclusion of women and ethnic minorities inevitable in the long run.

After World War II, and in some countries even earlier, the recognition of women's political and civil rights has become routine everywhere, including in countries that did not or do not embrace democracy. What has been historically a dramatic breakthrough toward democratic consolidations has turned almost everywhere into an idea to which almost all countries in the world pay homage, although in reality politics and governance remain a male prerogative almost everywhere. But recognition of women's rights has not automatically made political systems more pluralistic or more likely to develop democratic institutions.

This is quite clear in the Arab world today. Those Arab states that recognize some political rights of citizens—such as being able to elect legislative assemblies—also recognize the political rights of women. Kuwait, which does not recognize political rights for women, is a real anomaly in this regard. What keeps Arab countries from being democratic is not the exclusion of women, but the fact that elected institutions have very little power and impose no effective checks on monarchs who govern as well as rule and on presidents whose power base is in the security forces or a strong party.

The struggle for women's rights and the core struggle to achieve democracy—that is, to reduce the excessive and arbitrary power of the executive—must be seen as separate processes in the Arab world today. Progress toward democracy in the Arab world depends on the emergence of countervailing forces and organized groups that the government cannot ignore and that have to be accommodated in the political system. Simply including women in a hollow political process does nothing to create such countervailing forces. This does not mean that the promotion of equal rights for women has to wait until countervailing forces emerge or political institutions that curb the excessive power of the executive are put in place. Certainly, the two battles can be waged simultaneously. There should be no illusion, however, either that promoting women's rights will lead to democracy or that the emergence of institutions of checks and balances will automatically solve the problem of equality for women.

## Policy Impact of Including Women

Although formally recognizing women's political and civil rights does not ensure the transformation of a nondemocratic country into a democratic one, there is some evidence that including women in the political process appears to have an impact on public policy. The empirical evidence on the impact of women's presence in legislatures and elected local councils is extremely sketchy, anecdotal, and generally partisan, because the studies are often conducted by researchers who want to demonstrate positive results. Still, the results are fairly consistent across regions and studies. In general, it appears that local councils and parliaments where at least 20 percent of the members are women are more likely to focus on issues that directly affect women—such as divorce or land ownership laws—or that affect the welfare of their families—for example, the availability of clean water or schooling.<sup>6</sup> However, it is also clear that much of the progress made in improving the legal status of women in most countries has been made by male-dominated legislatures.

The number of women in policymaking positions remains low worldwide. For example, in early 2003, women represented less than 14 percent of the total in the U.S. Congress. The percentage of women parliamentarians was highest in Scandinavian countries, but even there women still constituted less than 40 percent of the total, with Sweden the only exception. Formal equality of rights does not translate easily into equal political roles for men and women even in the countries where women are most emancipated.<sup>7</sup>

Available evidence suggests that women only become an effective voice in legislatures when they are present in sufficient numbers to constitute a substantial bloc. This evidence has encouraged the launching of programs that seek to increase the number of women in elected positions. The 1995 UN Conference on Women, held in Beijing, adopted as a target that women should occupy 30 percent of parliamentary seats. By March 2000, 21 countries had imposed a quota of 20 or 30 percent for at least one house, and an additional country, Finland, has imposed a 50 percent quota.<sup>8</sup> Some Arab governments, including those of Jordan and Egypt, have made an effort to appoint more women to national legislatures and high-level government positions. The United States, which does not advocate a quota system, is nevertheless committed to increasing the presence of women in Middle East legislatures. For example, through the MEPI, the United States is providing training to female political candidates in the hope of increasing women's presence in the legislatures.

Opinions remain sharply divided about efforts to increase the presence of women in elective offices. To some, the low presence of women is an urgent problem to be tackled through the imposition of quotas and the adoption of special measures. To others, it is simply a symptom, a reflection of cultural values and social traditions that cannot be expected to change rapidly. The issue remains one of intense debate in part because the evidence is not particularly clear. Although there is no doubt that the countries where women enjoy the highest political presence are also the ones where women's rights receive the greatest recognition and respect, it is far from clear whether the former causes the latter or vice versa.

## Women's Empowerment in the Middle East: A Greater Impact?

Increased participation by women in political life has hardly any impact on the functioning of political systems and, at best, a modest impact on policy. The removal of legal and social barriers that prevent women from enjoying access to education and jobs has a great deal of impact on the personal lives and income-earning capacity of women, and thus on their children. These are not negligible

results, and they certainly justify efforts by the United States to promote rights for women as well as their advancement in the society. However, an expectation has developed that women's rights and empowerment in the Arab world will have a more far-reaching impact. As the *Arab Human Development Report 2002* stated, in order to participate fully in the world of the twenty-first century, Arab countries must tackle the deficit of women's empowerment.

Is there reason to believe that the promotion of women's rights, not only in theory but in practice, would have a greater impact in the Arab world than it has had elsewhere? Could promotion of women's rights shake these societies in a much more dramatic way than has been the case elsewhere? Is the extension of women's rights the beginning of a road to profound change in Arab countries, as the rhetoric suggests?

For the vast majority of Arab states, the answer is negative. In most countries, women already enjoy the same political rights, limited as they are, as men. Family status laws are improving slowly in a number of countries; and this process is likely to continue because this is an area where incumbent governments can demonstrate to the world their reforming zeal without undermining their power. Women are also becoming much better educated in most countries, even in the closed societies of the Gulf. It is true that social values are changing slowly and that the growth of Islamist movements in many countries is creating new obstacles for women. But in general a gradual process toward improving women's rights is under way.

The political systems of most Arab countries can incorporate such changes in the position of women without difficulty, because their political systems have a degree of flexibility. Although no Arab regimes can be considered democratic, many are semi-authoritarian, combining relatively democratic political institutions and some limited recognition of individual rights and personal freedom with an overly strong executive. Countries such as Egypt, Jordan, or Morocco, for example, have proven adept at maintaining a balance between authoritarianism and limited democratic freedoms, and they can undoubtedly absorb some changes in the position of women without much difficulty. Autocratic but secular countries—Syria, for example, and in the past Iraq—have no problem making concessions to women.

The question of whether the expansion of women's rights would have a different, more far-reaching effect in Arab nations than it had in the rest of the world thus can only be raised in relation to the countries of the Gulf, which are the most closed socially and politically. Even in these countries, however, the present trend is toward slow, cautious social and political reform. Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, and Qatar are moving hesitantly in that direction, with the governments apparently in full control of the pace of change. Saudi Arabia has been very wary of embarking on any type of reform, social or political, although recent statements suggest that it may decide to follow the example of its neighbors.

In conclusion, there seem to be little reason to expect that improved rights for women in the Middle East would have a more dramatic political impact than similar reforms in the rest of the world.

## **CAN THE UNITED STATES MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

Despite the resounding regime change rhetoric of official speeches, the Bush administration is in reality taking a rather soft, indirect approach to promoting democracy in the region. Only

the governments of Syria and Iran are being singled out for strong unambiguous criticism. The administration has taken a much more ambivalent, cautious position vis-à-vis Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the home countries of most of the September 11 hijackers, but also countries whose cooperation the United States still needs. In most other countries, the administration is taking a lenient attitude, praising highly any hint of political reform and refraining from criticizing glaring shortcomings.<sup>9</sup>

The major vehicle through which the administration is trying to promote this indirect approach to democratization via social transformation is the Middle East Partnership Initiative: a program developed during 2002 and officially launched at the end of the year. MEPI funds projects designed to foster educational, economic, and social reform. The promotion of women occupies a central place in the MEPI approach, with many projects targeting primarily women. Though classified as one initiative, MEPI is better understood as a series of independent activities rather than one organic whole. Women's programs are no exception. They include, for example, women's literacy programs in countries such as Morocco and Yemen, organizing conferences on women, training in business skills and microcredit programs for Palestinian women, training of female political candidates in several countries, training of advocates for women rights, and programs on women's health. There are many more projects of this kind already under way and more yet are being planned as the funding for MEPI increases.<sup>10</sup> The initiative was funded at \$29 million in FY2002 and \$100 million in FY2003, with more expected for FY2004.

Can these discrete projects make a difference? The question needs to be considered from different angles. From the point of view of individual women reached by the projects, this assistance can have a positive effect, although in most cases not a dramatic one. Well-managed microcredit projects have been shown to help women, marginally increasing their revenue, an improvement that usually translates into better food for the family or school fees for the children. On the other hand, microloans do not usually change people's lives, but only make poverty less dire—not a negligible outcome. Similarly, literacy programs do not dramatically change the lives of women or create employment opportunities for them, but they do help bring them in touch with the modern world around them and affect their attitudes toward the education of their children, particularly girls. As is often the case with foreign assistance, some programs will prove to be poorly conceived and designed and will make little difference even at the level of individuals.

As contributions to the democratization of the region, programs of this kind are unlikely to make a difference. President Bush has declared that the United States “will consistently challenge the enemies of reform,” but there is no challenge to the real opponents of democracy in MEPI's projects, particularly projects that target women.<sup>11</sup> Generally small and innocuous, the projects do not affect the distribution of power, do nothing to make it more difficult for governments to contain political liberalization and prevent the development of true opposition groups. The very concept of “partnership” with governments and civil society organizations on which MEPI is based precludes the enactment of programs that incumbent governments do not like. Instead, there is a real risk that authoritarian or semi-authoritarian governments may use MEPI projects as a means to bolster their reformist credentials without substantially increasing political, economic, or social space. In conclusion, it is difficult to see MEPI projects that focus on women as part, even a modest part, of a strategy of democracy promotion.

## CONCLUSION

Advancing women's rights in the Arab world is an important goal, and the United States should continue to pursue it in the name of equity and justice. Improving the position of women might also have a favorable impact on economic growth, children's welfare, and fertility rates, as has been the case in other countries. There should be no illusion, however, that pressuring Arab governments to recognize the rights of women and undertaking projects to improve their lives addresses the most fundamental obstacles to democracy: the unchecked power of strong executives. Promoting democracy and promoting women's rights need to be recognized as tasks that require different approaches.

Whether and how the United States could contribute to the democratic transformation of the Middle East at present is an issue that goes beyond the scope of this paper. It is clear, however, that it cannot do so through programs that advance the rights of women and opportunities for them. Confusing the advancement of women and the advancement of democracy is not only incorrect but also dangerous in the atmosphere of deep distrust of the United States that already exists in the Middle East. Conflating democracy and the advancement of women encourages liberal Arabs, who are already doubtful about the U.S. commitment to democracy, to become even more skeptical—the United States has chosen to teach girls to read instead of confronting autocratic governments. Conservative Arabs, who already tend to interpret the moral degeneration (in their eyes) of the West to be a result of democracy, worry even more when U.S. officials talk about democracy and trying to change the position of women in their societies. The identification of democracy and women's rights leads to sinister interpretations and unintended consequences in the Arab world. There is great need for the United States government not only to rethink the nexus of democracy and the promotion of women, but also to become more sensitive to the great gap that separates what U.S. officials say and what different Arab constituencies hear.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Program (UNDP), *Arab Human Development Report 2002* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 23.
- <sup>2</sup> Speech delivered at the Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., on December 12, 2002.
- <sup>3</sup> UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2002*, table 31. The report lists 22 countries, including the Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Palestine, Somalia, and Sudan. This paper will exclude the above countries and only consider sixteen: Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen.
- <sup>4</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), table 27.
- <sup>5</sup> UNDP, *Arab Human Development Report 2003* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), tables A-2, A-3, and A-4.
- <sup>6</sup> Irene Tinker, "Quotas for Women in Elected Legislatures: Do They Really Empower Women?" unpublished paper presented to the International Center for Research on Women, Washington D.C., on October 23, 2003.
- <sup>7</sup> UNDP, *Human Development Report 2003*, table 27.
- <sup>8</sup> Tinker, "Quotas for Women." See also, International IDEA, "Global Database of Quotas for Women," [www.idea.int/quota](http://www.idea.int/quota).
- <sup>9</sup> The speech, delivered by President Bush at the National Endowment for Democracy on November 6, 2003, offers a prime example of this approach.
- <sup>10</sup> Information on MEPI programs is available online at [www.mepi.state.gov](http://www.mepi.state.gov).
- <sup>11</sup> Speech delivered by President Bush at Whitehall Palace, London, England, on November 19, 2003.

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